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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000179

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

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NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA -- WE WILL COMPLY QUICKLY WITH TRIBUNAL REQUESTS

REF: A. BEIRUT 00096

1B. BEIRUT 00141

1C. BEIRUT 00153

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Prime Minister Siniora on February 12 expressed GOL intentions to comply quickly to all requests that may come from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, including the transfer to the Hague of the four incarcerated generals, if the STL requests it. In a meeting with the Ambassador, visiting USAID Special Assistant for the Middle East George Laudato, USAID Mission Director and PolEconOff, Siniora said the transfer "may or may not" require Cabinet approval, but he expected few obstacles either way.

12. (C) On Saudi King Abdullah's Arab Peace Initiative, Siniora suspected the Syrians were up to their "usual games" of playing dueling sides off each other. Their goal is getting the U.S. to agree to talks with Syria, he said. Siniora doubted there would be a quick resolution to his disagreements with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri over funding for the Council for the South. He said the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian jails might first be raised in the Arab League, before the GOL raises the issue in the UN Human Rights Commission. End summary.

SLOW-MOVING API

13. (C) The Ambassador, following up on Siniora's readout of the January Arab Economic Summit in Kuwait (reftel A), asked about the status of Saudi King Abdullah's efforts to bring Syria back into the Arab fold. Siniora said he expected the Syrians were up to their "normal games" of playing opposing sides against each other. In Siniora's opinion, Syria's goal is to talk to the new U.S. administration; the Syrians were using their closeness to Iran as a means to promote that goal.

14. (C) Siniora expressed dismay at the recent Israeli election results, assessing that it was a "victory for extremism" and a "real set-back" for the peace process. He argued that Arab extremism would continue in the face of

Israeli extremism. He noted that the U.S. could mitigate the situation by applying its influence in Israel in a calculated manner.

¶ 15. (C) Regarding Lebanon's role in the path toward peace, Siniora reiterated a message he said he had passed to Secretary of State Clinton in their recent phone call that Lebanon wanted a "seat at the table", not be a bargaining chip "on the table." Siniora was unconcerned about recent U.S. congressional delegations in Syria. The number of visits is unimportant, he said; the content of the U.S. message is what counts.

LOOKING INTO REQUIREMENTS FOR STL TRANSFER

¶ 16. (C) In a February 12 meeting with the Ambassador, visiting USAID Special Assistant for the Middle East George Laudato, USAID Mission Director and PolEconOff, Prime Minister Siniora said it was not certain if the transfer of the four generals detained in connection with the 2005 Rafiq Hariri assassination to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) required Cabinet approval. He said the issue was being studied closely to determine what was required. However, Siniora said he expected no obstacles in Cabinet to the transfer, if Cabinet approval were necessary. Siniora emphasized cooperation with the STL and said Lebanon would comply with all requests it receives from the court.

DETAINEES IN SYRIA

NOT YET AN ISSUE FOR THE UN

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¶ 17. (C) The Ambassador asked Siniora if he had considered raising in the UN Human Rights Committee the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian jails. Siniora said the GOL had not done so, explaining that Lebanon would need to file the complaint first with the Arab League before addressing the issue in the UN. The GOL had refused an Arab league request to lead an investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri; it turned instead to the UN. Siniora therefore believed Lebanon might address the detainee issue first with the Arab League. However, detainees were just one of many issues -- such as border demarcation, smuggling, and Palestinian bases that would have to be addressed.

LACKLUSTER ABOUT BUDGET PROGRESS

¶ 18. (C) Siniora was pessimistic regarding a potential solution to his well-publicized disagreement with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri over funding for the Council for the South (ref C), a dispute holding up approval of the 2009 budget. Siniora again blamed Berri for seeking more money than had previously been agreed upon. Siniora blamed Berri for "taking the whole country hostage" and demanding "ransom" of increased funding for the Council for the South. The Prime Minister rejected the idea of creating a Ministry of Planning to replace the Council for the South and other such development funds.

¶ 19. (C) On the possibility that Berri's position could delay approval of the 2009 budget, Siniora nonchalantly replied that "if there's no budget, there's no budget." Siniora expressed exasperation at Berri's calls to abolish the Higher Relief Council, saying that 99 percent of the Council's funding goes to southern Lebanon, home of most of Berri's Shia constituency. Claiming to defend the people of southern Lebanon, Berri is in fact seeking to abolish a large source of their funds, Siniora argued.

NO UNITY GOVERNMENT AFTER ELECTIONS?

¶10. (C) Siniora commented on the possibility Sunni leader Saad Hariri would not form a national unity government if March 14 wins 2009 parliamentary elections and Hariri is selected as Prime Minister. Siniora cited his difficulties as Prime Minister in the current national unity government as evidence that such a formation often obstructs decision-making. Siniora argued the basis of democracy is majority rule. Although consensus is required at times, progress is impossible if all decisions need a consensus, as is effectively the case with a unity government, Siniora said.

¶11. (C) He described the multi-confessional, democratic nature of Lebanon as exemplary in the Arab world, but insisted that if Lebanon were a true democracy, the majority would be empowered to make decisions. A checks-and-balances system is inherent in democracy; if the ruling majority fails, the population will vote to remove them, he noted.

PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT KEY

¶12. (C) USAID Special Assistant for the Middle East Laudato expressed optimism that USAID funding for Lebanon would increase in the next year and expressed his commitment to continue ongoing projects in the country. Siniora was positive about the development of free trade zones in Lebanon. Siniora hopes to increase private sector involvement in the development of several areas in Lebanon. Free zones would stimulate the economy and create diversity without adding unnecessary competition. The GOL can only provide the infrastructure, Siniora said, but the private sector could capitalize on skills and needs in the country. Siniora mentioned specifically areas for tourism, call centers, and medical care centers. If you show people they

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"have a share in the cake," he said, they then will have an interest to protect it.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) We note that the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syria, like so many issues in Lebanon, have been used by various political actors to gain support. Opposition figure Michel Aoun, in particular, had hoped to use the issue to his advantage when he traveled to Syria, but he returned home empty-handed. We hope that, unlike in the July 2008 Hizballah-Israel prisoner exchange, the GOL will get credit if and when Syria releases the prisoners. End comment.

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